



TOMER GOREN is the master distiller of the M&H Distillery.
(Photos: M&H Distillery)

TEL AVIV'S ANGELS



• ADAM MONTEFIORE

Recently there has been a flowering of artisan, craft distilleries in Israel. Now, there are some producers of high-quality blue-and-white spirits, many totally original, using local ingredients. Chief among these are the Milk & Honey Distillery in Tel Aviv; Julius Distillery in the Western Galilee; Yerushalmi Distillery in Jerusalem; and both Golan & Pelter Distilleries on the Golan Heights.

The artisan Julius was the first. I have tasted some of their products, which are truly outstanding.

The largest is the Milk & Honey Distillery, whose mission is to bring Israel into the world of whisky. Whisky is mainly produced in five countries: Scotland, Canada, Japan where it is known as whisky, and Ireland and America, where it is spelled with an “e” – whiskey. In recent years there have been many new countries making whisky for the first time. The most famous of these is Taiwan. Their Kavalan brand astonished the world by winning some major awards. The hot humid weather in Taiwan is similar to Israel’s climate.

Fast forward to 2012. A few hi-tech’ists, led by Gal Kalkshtein, dreamt big and decided to bring authentic whisky to the Holy Land. No corners were cut. They employed the late Dr. Jim Swan, one of the main gurus of the whisky world, as a consultant. He was the adviser to Kavalan and a specialist in whisky in hot

countries. Tomer Goren, ex-brewer, whisky fanatic and now master distiller, became the chef. He worked at both Tomintoul and Springbank in Scotland. Springbank is one of my favorite distilleries. It is like a time capsule from another era.

The name Milk & Honey could not be more biblical. The “Promised Land” was referred to as a land of milk and honey. I have read that in days gone by, Scots added milk and honey to their whisky to make it more palatable. I do not know if it is true, but as I always say (as did Mark Twain), never let the truth get in the way of a good story.

I DECIDED to visit these enterprising gentlemen in south Tel Aviv.

I arrived at what was once a bakery not far from Jaffa, within walking distance of the sea. I entered a nondescript door and had the feeling I had entered a nightclub. The first thing you notice is the garish logo. It is of a bull decorated in the blue and black stripes of a bumble bee.

Why the bull?

“Well, we tried it with a cow first, but the bull looked better!” was the answer.

The visitor center is painted in the brand colors. There are colorful graffiti-style whisky messages on the walls. There were a number of workers buzzing about wearing M&H polo shirts. All were young, smiling and they gave a feeling of liveliness and creativity. You certainly felt the spirit and energy of the Israeli start-up.

The proof in the pudding was in the eating. When I sat down to taste, I was offered one dram aged in a barrel previously used to age pomegranate wine. There was another matured in a barrel in which the C Blanc du Castel (one of our finest Chardonnays) was fermented, and aged sur lies. I immediately felt the creativity and the Israeli penchant for trying something new, pushing the boundaries, experimenting for the fun of it all. The M&H team is having a ball with their cask specials.

Looking through the glass windows into the distillery, I wondered what I would find. Would it be a “whisky wanna be” or perhaps a Heath Robinson operation run by enthusiastic amateurs? I have visited many distilleries in my life, including a weeklong tour to Speyside, Scotland, followed a year later by a visit to Islay and Campbeltown, both also in Scotland. I am pleased to report that immediately when I entered the M&H distillery, it felt like an authentic, whisky distillery. It may be large compared with other Israeli distilleries, but it is no more than a spot on the nose compared to most small distilleries in Scotland.

There were two large pot stills. One, the wash still, was a refugee from Romania of all places. The other, the spirit still, was state-of-the-art from Germany. They also have an adorable 250-liter pot still, with which they literally handcraft their gin.

INGREDIENTS ARE paramount. Malted barley comes from England; peated barley from the Czech Republic. The water is Israeli, but only after it has



MILK & HONEY'S pot still, used for distilling Israeli whisky



THE WHISKIES mature fast in casks due to Israel's hot climate.

been treated in their water laboratory. There were casks everywhere: inside, outside, in the corridors, along the walls, almost up the walls. If you landed from outer space, you might think you had arrived in an antique shop specializing in barrels of different origins, shapes and sizes. They have over 1,500 casks. These include bourbon casks from America, sherry butts from Spain, whisky casks from Scotland and wine barrels from Israel. Most famous is the STR cask, specially developed by Dr. Swan. This is a wine barrel that has been shaved, toasted and then re-charred. It was designed for hot-climate maturation, to advance positive flavors and negate the harsh ones. When you enter the official cask room, you are hit by the seductive smell of whisky-soaked oak and alcohol. It is like waking up in the center of a brandy-soaked Christmas cake.

The climate is the most significant Israeli effect on the whisky. It can be hot here with high humidity, particularly on the coast. This accelerates the aging process and could be a problem, but M&H turns it into an advantage. The angel's share, which is the evaporation, can be as much as 11% in Tel Aviv. Imagine producing a quality, expensive product and signing off 11% before you start. In Scotland, the angel's share is between 2% to 4%. Maybe in the Holy Land the angels are blessed. Being players and tinkerers, M&H is having fun experimenting. Casks are sent for maturation in different micro-climates. Some have even been sent to the Dead Sea, the lowest point on earth. Here the angel's share can be as much as 25%! Fortunately for M&H, the whisky ages more quickly and so will not be left there for too long.

In 2017, they launched Israel's first authentic

whisky, matured for three years in cask. In cold climates, whisky needs to age for about 10 years before being released. There are no whisky laws in Israel, so they follow the acceptable norm in Scotland.

I WAS hosted on my visit by Tal Chotiner, who has done everything in the spirit world. He has been involved in every facet of the spirits and liquor trade and knows the market forward and backward. M&H is slightly exotic and therefore of interest to whisky geeks. It certainly makes them a whole lot more credible to have someone who is knowledgeable, known and respected representing them in export markets. They export to 20 countries already and have already received third-party recognition internationally. They are certainly headed in a good direction.

The M&H Classic is a three-year-old whisky aged in 75% bourbon casks, 20% red wine STR casks and 5% virgin oak. It was light, aperitif style, but not lacking in character. I kept returning to it during the tasting. The aromas were enchanting, if fleeting. Nice sweetness, a little zesty, some citrusy notes, but overall delicate.

Certainly, it had more on the nose than the flavor, but it was an authentic whisky nonetheless.

I was pleased to taste the M&H Elements Red Wine Cask whisky. This was interesting to me, because many moons ago I initiated the idea of Bruichladdich Distillery from Islay, finishing two whiskies in red wine barrels from Carmel Winery. I still treasure the resulting whiskies, which are beautiful drams. The Elements Red Wine Cask had floral notes and a definable winery nose and a touch of drying tannin

on the finish.

The Elements Peated expression was, as you would expect, peaty and smoky. They import casks from Islay for this. It is not medicinal Laphroaig style, nor does the peat overpower the other aromas. It is well balanced and intriguing.

Echoing Macallan in the old halcyon days, but on a rather smaller scale, M&H took the trouble to have kosher Oloroso and Pedro Ximenez sheries made and aged in sherry butts for one year. The Sherry Cask Whisky was my favorite of the Elements. It was slightly richer, with a sweet dried fruit nose and the flavor seemed to have more length than the other whiskies. They tell me this is the first and only malt whisky aged in kosher sherry casks. My favorite of the special expressions was the Apex Cognac Cask. It was warm, complex and had great length. This is something to look forward to.

The M&H Levantine Gin is a wonderful product. It starts like the whisky. The base spirit is 100% malted barley, which is mashed at the distillery and distilled in the pot still. They then add the juniper and botanicals hand-sourced from the Lewinsky market in Tel Aviv. These include za'atar, lemon peel, orange, chamomile, lemon verbena, cinnamon and black pepper. These are then distilled for a third time in their small, almost domestic-sized pot still. Theirs is not a gin dominated by prominent juniper aromas, which may be more suitable for a gin and tonic. Levantine has lifted aromas that should be enjoyed in a balloon glass or drunk in a Martini cocktail. This is a super, aromatic Israeli expression of gin.

THE MILK and Honey Visitors Center is a great place to visit. A tour, explanation and tasting costs NIS 50. There is also a shop with the full range of products and some M&H souvenirs.

M&H has walked a tightrope between gaining respect of the whisky intelligentsia by their authenticity, and at the same showing the Israeli chutzpa, creativity and ingenuity. It seems they have succeeded on both fronts. No doubt, for the first time ever, we have a whisky to be proud of.

As for any whisky-loving angels, pack your bags and make aliyah. Apparently, Israel is the place to be. ■

The writer is a wine trade veteran, who has advanced Israeli wine for 35 years. He is referred to as the English voice of Israeli wine. www.adammontefiore.com



M&H CLASSIC – An authentic & quality whisky from Israel



M&H LEVANTINE GIN – A uniquely Israeli expression